

SAN JOSE NEWS (CA)
16 April 1980

Turner has a lot to learn

ADMIRAL Stansfield Turner, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, astounded the American Society of Newspaper Editors last week with the statement that he sees nothing wrong with the CIA's hiring journalists as secret agents.

Three of our own editors were among the ASNE members present, and we can report from first-hand observation that it was one of those rare and disconcerting moments when an audience can hardly believe what it has just heard.

In this instance, the speaker was equally nonplussed by the reaction of his audience. Turner accused the editors of being "naive" — and, he implied, unpatriotic as well.

Most, if not all, of the editors had been under the impression that the CIA was still sticking by a policy laid down by Turner's predecessor, George Bush, in 1976. The policy was clear and simple: "The CIA will not enter into any paid or contractual relationship with any full-time or part-time news correspondent accredited by any U.S. news service, newspaper, periodical, radio or television network or station."

Turner, however, said he changed that policy in 1977. Since then, he has regarded it as acceptable for the CIA to hire American journalists on a covert basis — so long as the move has his personal knowledge and approval. He has given such approval three times, he said, and although those plans never materialized, he'd see nothing wrong with doing so again.

Well, Admiral, we see a lot wrong with

it, and our objection certainly does not stem from any lack of patriotism, as you suggest.

Just as intelligence agents have their special role in serving our country, so do journalists. And our job is not to become part of government, but to stand outside it and tell the people, as well and as honestly as we can, what it's doing. That's why the Constitution protects our business as it does no other — because we represent the people's right to know.

We compromise and violate that independent status as soon as we become co-opted by the CIA or any other public or private entity.

Abe Rosenthal, executive editor of the New York Times, spoke for all of us, Admiral, when he told you at last week's meeting in Washington that "you have put into question the real purpose of American foreign correspondents, and you have cast doubt on the ethical position of every American correspondent abroad."

The problem is that if the CIA can hire even one journalist, then all journalists are suspect. It's not that we don't consider the CIA's job important, Admiral. But our job is at least as essential — and there's no way for us to help you with your intelligence gathering without impairing our own news gathering.

We're dismayed, Admiral Turner, that a man could rise to a position such as yours without at least an elementary understanding of the role of the press in a free society. Don't they teach the U.S. Constitution at Annapolis?